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Deposited in DRO:

12 November 2015

Version of attached file:

Supplemental Material

Peer-review status of attached file:

Not peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Crang, Mike (2015) 'Bare life in the Myrr, Mos, and Mire.', Other. UNSPECIFIED.

Further information on publisher's website:

<https://cvacadurham.wordpress.com/2015/10/18/the-liveliest-of-elements-an-ordinary-extraordinary-material/>

Publisher's copyright statement:

Additional information:

Exhibition essay for The Liveliest of Elements, an Ordinary Extraordinary Material, Durham Castle and Woodhorn Colliery Museum October- November 2015

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BARE LIFE IN THE MȲRR, MĒOS, AND MIRE

MIKE CRANG

Erthe toc of erthe erthe wyth woh.
Erthe other erthe to the erthe droh.
Erthe leyde erthe in erthene throh.
Tho heuede erthe of erthe erthe ynoh.¹

Anonymous

The upland bogs and mires are aesthetically difficult places. As Emily Brady observed of the Icelandic landscape the classic categories of the agreeably beautiful, the challenging sublime or the recuperation of disorder into the picturesque say little about landscapes that might be deemed ugly.² It is perhaps not surprising that in Iceland the mires and bogs are presented on maps by a melange of symbols for meadows on the one hand and marshland on the other ³ The upland peatbogs of England seem as equally semiotically unstable as they are physically. The words for them though come down the ages, from the Old Norse of *mȳrr* to the Middle English of *mĒos* from thence to moss and mire. These are terms that suck in sets of negative connotations – cropping up in myth and literature as the beyond of civilisation, the wild and dangerous. In Treviso’s Middle English translation of The Properties of Things, the mires figure as a mingling of ‘water and slyme’ where ‘moche superfluyte of slyme and of wose’ –a language that seems fit for the oozing and unstable.⁴ The lack of stability is there in the Devon term for the boglands of Dartmoor as a ‘feather bed’ landscape due to wobble of coherent vegetation overlaying saturated peat.⁵ It is in their midst that Haggs seem to find a life of their own – coming adrift and moving, unsettled and unsettling of our notion that earth should stay where it is. The word hagg itself is from the old Norse *haggw* to hew for an element of land cut adrift.

The question raised in Laura Harrington’s *Landscape Language* is perhaps how to approach this world where ‘every inert object, every living thing as well, sleeps under the cover of signs.. multiply wrapped under writings, folded under printed matter, gagged under images, hidden under sounds, choked under language, lost under a hundred screens?’ ⁶ The uplands she addresses are so clearly alive and yet so clearly denuded. It is an ‘erthe’ in the middle English sense of the stuff of the planet that is also the stuff of ourselves, beings of clay, as the punning poet would have in the epigram at the head of this essay. It is with labour and difficulty that we extract substance and meaning from this soil, it slows and stills us – drags us down and in and permits no easy ascent to look down upon it. As much as the Bog People’s corpses for Seamus Heaney, it traps and preserves –traces of past life such

as flora and past climates and then yielding back to us. The ‘unfenced country// Is bog that keeps crusting’ with a ground that is ‘melting underfoot’ and whose ‘wet centre is bottomless’.⁷ But for Heaney the finding from this is not precious metal but more ordinary, as in ‘Relic of Memory’ he finds a sodden and petrified log that he celebrates as more significant than stones or metals or gems – for in it is preserved a sense of sap and life.⁸

This focus on the wet, the labile and vegetative is part then of the problem of art for haggs and high places. They resist the easy appropriation of the lithic and stony. These have ‘proved themselves appealing to twentieth- and twenty first-century authors concerned with place-writing and the development of place consciousness more widely... [since t]he austere presence of materials which have emerged from a scale of time difficult to relate to our own has offered a humbling corrective to our modern experience.⁹ As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has so ably shown stone has often functioned as the solid ground on which philosophy can rise – its unchanging obdurate other – that invokes a romantic sense of expansive time extending into the geologic past and forwards. It was thus Leopold’s realisation that “only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf.”¹⁰ To think of a world not organised around humanity, a less anthropocentric vision, takes a recasting of eyes onto processes and durations seen from different angles. The movement of mountains wandering across the globe, their rise and fall, shows that nothing is really stable, that even the most rooted and solid is entangled in global process.¹¹ But in a timescale of eons the appeal of rock is that it perdures, that it appears adamantine and resistant, as obdurate and unyielding.

But the high places here are not rocky mountains, but muddy ones. How then to speak of such a different more viscous materiality. Heidegger speaks of intrusive material presence, of a world that refuses to disclose itself to us, a *muthos*, a withholding. ‘[T]he earth, is openly illuminated as itself only where it is apprehended and preserved as the essentially undisclosable, as that which withdraws from every disclosure, in other words, keeps itself constantly closed up’ ¹² In this then perhaps we see the promise for non-anthropocentric art held out by Elizabeth Grosz. For her the excess of material properties and qualities, of possible uses, enabling things to be more than they more than being self-evident creates a start for an art born out of ‘chaos’.

‘the whirling, unpredictable movement of forces, vibratory oscillations that constitute the universe. Chaos here may be understood not as absolute disorder but rather as a plethora of orders, forms, wills—forces that cannot be distinguished or differentiated from each other, both matter and its conditions for being otherwise’ ¹³

For her then science and as she terms it ‘Geography’ is the space of the map, which is regulated by measurable abstract coordinates, that is abstracted from its lived qualities. By contrast she points to a version of landscape that is a place revealed by sensation, which has no fixed coordinates but transforms and moves as a body passes through it.¹⁴ Art then in this vision should not depict matter but enable it to resonate, intensify and become more than itself. In a different vein this is to discover ‘wonder-full geomorphology’.¹⁵

One can find others looking to peat landscapes in this light. Rachel Giese’s *The Donegal Pictures* tries to both revision bogs as a sensory experience and use their dynamic texturing and depth, their apparent (entropic) disorganisation alongside striations from turf cutting them to evoke a haptic visuality where the visual can also become tactile (subjective and close) instead of remaining solely optical (objective and distant).¹⁶ Alternatively performance art with water by Minty Donald looked to engage the fluidity of matter. Taking samples from rivers, but also the everyday landscape of puddles and drips and dribbles, the best term to sum up their practice was through the Scottish colloquial phrase ‘guddling about’ for giving voice to nature, and evoking play through onomatopoeia.¹⁷

To return to the opening poem, what we have are multiple transits and instabilities under the term earth – where we are buried, where things come to rest, where we share the fabric of the world, where excavation is violence. As Jeffrey Cohen notes ‘the lyric insists upon the inherent metaphoricity of the material as well as the sheer materiality of metaphor’.¹⁸ The earth here is also a recording device for the seasons and climates past – though one that it takes science to read. The beautiful section drawings of haggs sit then alongside sparse scientific photography. It is a landscape at once bare and barren – without the fecundity in which so much ‘nature writing’ luxuriates. These denuded landscapes though call forth a sense of being an unfinished world:

a composition - a poesis - and one that literally can’t be seen as a simple repository of systemic effects imposed on an innocent world but has to be traced through the generative modalities of impulses, daydreams, ways of relating, distractions, strategies, failures, encounters, and worldings of all kinds.¹⁹

The peat landscape here acts. We might ask it what has it known? The earth here is both a wandering and a grounding, a name and a substance.²⁰ Moss Flats speaks of the wild places, and the high places, yet its curiously alien and bare surface renders the matter of the earth apparent.

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¹ Various translations of this Middle English poem can be found online. My favourite for its sense and style: Earth took of earth earth with ill; Earth other earth gave earth with a will. Earth laid earth in the earth stock-still: Then earth in earth had of earth its fill.

² Brady, E. (2010). The Sublime, Ugliness and “Terrible Beauty” in Icelandic Landscapes. *Conversations with Landscape*. K. Benediktsson and K. A. Lund. Farnham, Ashgate: 125-136.

³ Huijbens, E. H. and G. Pálsson (2009). “The bog in our brain and bowels: social attitudes to the cartography of Icelandic wetlands.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27(2): 296-316.

⁴ On the Properties of Things, John Trevisa’s Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum, a Critical Text, eds. M. C. Seymour, et al., vols. 1 and 2 (1975); vol. 3 (1988).

⁵ Tyler, D. (2015). *Uncommon Ground: A word-lover’s guide to the British landscape* London, faber anf faber.

⁶ pages 38-9, Serres, M. (2010). Biogea. Minneapolis, Univocal.

⁷ Bogland Seamus Heaney, in Door into the Dark 1969, Longman.

⁸ Page 39, Vendler, Helen Hennessy.Seamus Heaney. Harvard University Press, 2000.

⁹ Page 62, Smith, J. (2015). “‘Lithogenesis’: Towards a (Geo) Poetics of Place.” *Literary Geographies* 1(1): 62-78.

¹⁰ Flader, S. L. (1994). *Thinking like a mountain: Aldo Leopold and the evolution of an ecological attitude toward deer, wolves, and forests*, Univ of Wisconsin Press.

¹¹ Massey, D. (2006). “Landscape as a provocation - Reflections on moving mountains.” *Journal of Material Culture* 11(1-2): 33-48.

¹² Smith, op.cit. pages 24-25

¹³ Page 6 , Grosz, E. A. (2008). *Chaos, territory, art: Deleuze and the framing of the earth*, Columbia University Press.

¹⁴ Grosz page 72.

¹⁵ Dixon, D. P., H. Hawkins and E. R. Straughan (2012). “Wonder-full geomorphology: Sublime aesthetics and the place of art.” *Progress in Physical Geography* 37(2): 227-247.

¹⁶ Gladwin, D. (2013). “Eco-Haptic Photography: Visualizing Irish Bogland in Rachel Giese’s The Donegal Pictures.” *Photography and Culture* 6(2): 157-174. Crang, M. (2010). Visual Methods and Methodologies. *The Handbook of Qualitative Geography*. D. Delyser, S. Herbert, S. Aitken, M. Crang and L. McDowell. London Sage: 208-225.

¹⁷ Donald, M. (2014). “Guddling About: Experiments in Vital Materialism with Particular Regard to Water.” *The Goose* 13(1): Article 35.

¹⁸ Cohen page 6

¹⁹ Page 73, Stewart, K. (2008). “Weak Theory in an Unfinished World.” *Journal of Folklore Research* 45(1): 71-82.

²⁰ Siewers, A. K. (2013). “Earth: A wandering.” *Postmedieval* 4(1): 6.